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Let’s Relax!

by Andrew Culp, Hui Peng, Leigh Jackson, Hannah Simpson and Patrick McKelvey | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Positions

ABSTRACT Andrew Culp and the Cultural Studies Association’s Performance Working Group Co-Chair Hui Peng discuss “relaxed performance” with Leigh Jackson, Director of Accessibility & EDI Programming at People's Light outside of Philadelphia, and Dr. Hannah Simpson, Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and author of *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Palgrave, 2022). This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Patrick McKelvey.

KEYWORDS ableism, disability, performance, theatre

Positions, Episode 2

Positions
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Commentary

By Patrick McKelvey

In her *Keywords for Disability Studies* entry, disability historian Bess Williamson introduces one definition of access as "the ability to enter into, move about within, and operate the facilities of a site."[1] For Williamson, this account of access is necessarily provisional, grounded as it is in mid-century understandings of the relationship between the body and the built environment. And she complicates this definition, including its historical, cultural, and ideological contingencies, in the pages that follow. When introducing my students to the subject of access, I

complement the Williamson piece with excerpts from the disability justice collective Sins Invalid's *Skin, Tooth, and Bone*, writings with a radical understanding of access as a collective political and aesthetic project that in many respects diverges from the liberal itineraries animating this "literal" understanding of access.[2] But part of what I love about the (admittedly limited) initial definition Williamson introduces is how it highlights the materiality of access, a materiality that often disappears in contemporary invocations of access as a self-evident good abstracted from systems of material support. It highlights, then, how access is insufficiently realized if one is only ever brought "into contact with someone or something"—access also requires making use of that with which one comes into contact.[3] With due apologies for the productivist tenor of this instrumental focus on utility—an aspiration of many genealogies of accessible design that have been rightly and thoroughly critiqued by disability theorist Aimi Hamraie among others—the student theatre makers I teach routinely find promise in this orientation to access, recognizing an imperative not only to get disabled audiences in seats and disabled artists on and off-stage, but also to create the conditions in which they can make use of their encounters with theatrical practice.[4]

This episode of *Positions* features a collective conversation about a specific development in the history of making theatre useful for disabled spectators. The panelists, cohosts Andrew Culp and Hui Peng, in conversation with guests Dr. Hannah Simpson (a leading disability performance theorist and author of the recent *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*) and Leigh Jackson (Director of Accessibility & EDI Programming at Philadelphia's People's Light and Theatre Company) focus on "relaxed performance," an access practice geared at cultivating environments in which the constraints of ableist spectatorial norms are at least tempered—or "loosened," in Peng's figuration.[5] Typically targeted at neurodivergent spectators in particular, relaxed conventions—such as raised house lights and permission to move and vocalize—challenge compulsory stillness and silence as conditions for engaged (and "polite") spectatorship.

These abled, classed, and racialized norms, *Positions* reminds us, are not timeless imperatives, but historically and culturally specific—norms that Simpson frames as consolidating in the United Kingdom following World War II. These norms, the panelists demonstrate, have proved incompatible with the needs of people with a diverse range of bodyminds. Behaviors that otherwise might have been regarded as benign (or even *desirable*) variations upon the forms of spectatorial corporeality to which we have become habituated, practices through which neurodivergent spectators engage—make use—of their collective theatrical presence, instead become dismissed, even pathologized, as disruptive and distracting.

Positions reviews not only what relaxed performance can look and whose access needs can be served through this practice, but the diverse institutional, aesthetic, and national contexts through which this access practice has traveled, and the conventions that have consolidated as a result. In addition to discussing an initiative among West End theatres in the early 2010s that inspired much work in this area, the panelists address how relaxed performances have taken shape in regional theatres in the United States; they discuss approaches to relaxed performance by disability culture artists like Jess Thom (Touretteshero, a significant figure in Simpson's recent book); and they provide glimpses of Peng's current research on how relaxed performance has taken shape in Hong Kong. In some instances, this attention to institutional context situates relaxed performance within a broader ecology of access practices, such as ASL interpretation and captioning at People's Light, and Thom's deployment of "access aesthetics," which is Graeae Theatre Company Artistic Director Jenny Sealey's term for modes of theatrical production in which access is a central commitment—and an aesthetically generative one—rather than a begrudging acquiescence in the name of compliance.[6] In addition to the generous and useful orientation to relaxed performance that the episode provides, I was struck by three recurrent threads that track across the conversation: the question of the proper subject of relaxed performance, the austerity of access, and labor.

First, there are several moments throughout the episode that touch on the question of the proper subject of relaxed performance (or perhaps the proper consumer of relaxed resources). While neurodivergent people are often the presumed users of relaxed aesthetics, the episode draws attention to the broad range of spectators whose access needs are met through relaxed conventions, such as caregivers with young children who may need to take advantage of freedom of movement (to cite one of Jackson's examples). In instances such as this, I hear echoes of feminist disability theorist Alison Kafer's "political/relational model of disability," which proposes—in part—that "notions of disability and able-bodiedness affect everyone, not just people with impairments," thus broadening the range of people who are oppressed by ableist institutions, including institutions like modern theatre where spectatorial norms disadvantage a range of people who live *relative* to disability, even if they are themselves not disabled.[7] In one of the episode's most provocative moments, Simpson reveals the radical stakes of this ethos in theatrical contexts, noting the capacity for relaxed performances not only to serve disabled spectators, but to restore embodiment to the theatrical auditorium tout court. As a challenge to compulsory corporeal austerity, relaxed performance, Simpson suggests, has the capacity to make theatre—the collective assembly of representational and spectatorial bodies—more like itself. Without foreclosing upon these generative aesthetic and political possibilities, Simpson simultaneously notes how some varieties of these universalizing impulses might give us pause. "I'm wary of going down that line," Simpson offers, "whereby we only do disability access if it's good for other people, too."

Second, I was struck by a recurrence of ideas that touched on different valences of what I began thinking about as the austerity of access. By this, I mean not only the disinvestment in the arts, disability, and social services that artificially render scarce the resources to realize access, but the aesthetic asceticism that structures which modes and genres of theatrical representation are given to warrant certain access practices to begin with. On this first point, Jackson shared

their experience working in a particular regional theatre production model in which there is a single relaxed performance for each production. They reflected upon the challenges of scheduling that performance at a time when it could serve as many people as possible. Of course, this challenge is compounded by it being an isolated offering, a common access measure among US regional theatres that do provide relaxed performances. This unnecessary austerity of access stands in sharp contrast to the world of disability arts and culture where Thom, as Simpson notes, has advocated for moving toward production models in which relaxed dynamics are the norm and "uptight" performances are offered only on an ad-hoc basis. Moreover, this austerity of access not only inflects what services are offered, but how they are consumed by audiences. To return to my earlier point about how the panelists engage with the complexity of who gets framed as the proper subject of relaxed performance aesthetics, Simpson notes apprehension among (ostensibly neurotypical) audiences about attending relaxed performances due to their "fear of taking up a resource" someone else might need. What we are presented with, then, is something of a vicious circle in which already inadequately resourced access measures risk being incorrectly interpreted as unpopular or undesirable because of the ways audiences have naturalized this logic of access austerity and managed their own spectatorship practices to accommodate scarce access offerings.

But there is yet another valence of austerity I detect in the conversation, one that pertains to the narrowly circumscribed range of theatrical modes, genres, and styles given to be available for, or assigned to, relaxed performance conventions. In this regard, Simpson notes how in the context of the UK, musicals and works for young audiences are among the theatrical fare for which relaxed performances are most frequently available. As a counter to this, Simpson describes Thom's production of Beckett's *Not I*, always performed with relaxed aesthetics, as an experiment seeking to expand the purview of works warranting relaxed offerings, a challenge Simpson (and Thom) locate not only in the difficulty of the work itself, but in the Beckett estate's heavy hand in constraining what is possible in

production. In this framing, Thom's practice in particular, and disability arts and culture more broadly, are offered as anti-austerity measures, challenges not only to the idea that relaxed performance is necessarily the exception to the "uptight" norm, but a refusal of the impoverished sensibility of which theatrical practices variously allow, warrant, or demand relaxed engagement.

Finally, a key thread I detected throughout this conversation concerned labor. Here, I mean not only attention to the infrastructural and artistic labor of access-making that relaxed performance entails (as much for access workers like Jackson, disability artists like Thom, and disability performance scholars like Peng and Simpson), although this was certainly key. At a couple of points in the episode, various panelists reference recent high-profile incidents in which actors have stopped mid-performance to accost spectators for using their cell phones, only to learn later that the alleged violators of theatrical protocols were appropriately using access-oriented apps (that provide audio description or captioning, for instance). While the panelists (rightly) focus on the need for actors and other theatre workers to be better trained on access practices to avoid such misunderstandings, I'm interested in how this these spectacular incidents replay a scenario that always casts (presumptively nondisabled) actors against (presumptively disabled) spectators.

The presumption that the disabled people who participate in theatrical events primarily do so as spectators, rather than actors or other theatre workers, has haunted the implementation of access at theatres and other cultural venues since the passage of Section 504, the civil rights clause of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. In my forthcoming book, *Disability Works*, I trace this dynamic throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a dynamic that has not altogether changed in the twenty-first century United States.[8] Carol J. Gill and Carrie Sandahl's comprehensive 2009 study, "Arts Career Outcomes and Opportunities for Americans with Disabilities," features as a constant refrain that "Access should be incorporated into the planning and implementation of all arts events, not only for audiences but for

artists as well."[9] While this is common practice in disability arts and culture, including the work of artists like Thom, it was with great interest that I heard Jackson move beyond questions of audience to the need for accessible theatrical production practices, including "relaxed" rehearsal spaces, capable of welcoming and supporting the theatrical labor of artists with divergent bodyminds.

Disabled arts workers, and not only disabled audiences—*Positions* ultimately reminds us—need to be at the center of any conversation about expanding who gets to make use of theatrical practice—and how.

Audio Transcript

Andrew Culp: Welcome to *Positions*, The Cultural Studies Association–sponsored podcast published through the open source journal *Lateral*. *Positions* aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics, cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* Journal on socials, and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes. On our second episode, the Performance Studies Working Group of the CSA hosts. Our episode's title is *Let's Relax: Audience Access and Relaxed Performance*.

We are guided by Peng Hui, special guest Leigh Jackson, and myself, Andrew Culp, also are joined by Hannah Simpson to discuss work on relaxed performance, including a recent book by Simpson: *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* with Palgrave. Enjoy.

Welcome, everyone. I'm Andrew, and I teach at the California Institute of the Arts in the M.A. in Aesthetics and Politics Program, as well as critical studies.

I'm joined here today by Hui, Hannah, and Lee. So let's just begin with some quick introductions. Hui?

Hui Peng: Hi, everybody. I'm Hui, and PhD candidate in theater and performance at Graduate Center, CUNY. I also teach at Hunter College. I'm a co-chair of the Performance Working Group at CSA. I'm very happy to have Lee and Hannah here today to discuss relaxed performance.

Leigh Jackson: Hi, I'm Leigh. I am the Director of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility Programming at People's Lightwhich is a [League of Resident Theatres Category D] theater in Malvern, just thirty minutes west of Philadelphia. I'm responsible for the accessibility supports that we offer during our seven-production season. These include the relaxed performances, open captioning, ASL interpretation, audio description, and something very new, our smart caption glasses, which is something that we are the first theater in the United States to offer. So, it's all very exciting work.

Hannah Simpson: Hi, my name is Dr. Hannah Simpson. I'm a lecturer in theatre and performance at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland in the UK, and I work mostly on the representation of the human body on stage, and politicized representations of the body more generally. And I've got special interest in the work of Samuel Beckett in depictions of physical pain and disability and issues of audience access.

I have written two monographs, *Samuel Beckett and the Theater of the Witness: Pain in Post-War Francophone Drama*, which was published with Oxford University Press in 2022, and *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*, which was published with Palgrave also in 2022. And I've published work on disabilities specifically in journals like *Theater Topics, The Journal of Beckett Studies*, the *Journal of Modern Literature* and the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*.

Andrew: We're so excited to have everyone today. Hui, I think, has created an excellent structure for the conversation, but it's going to be relaxed itself, a little bit open-ended and a bit of a discussion. We want to begin just with a brief introduction to Hannah's new book on Samuel Beckett and disability performance,

specifically chapter four on "*Not I*: Touretteshero, 2017–2020," and questions of audience access and relaxed performance.

So maybe we can just start there.

Hannah: Yeah, so this is my most recent book, *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*. And the book grapples with depictions of disability in Samuel Beckett's theater work, and both in the original play texts themselves, and with a really specific eye to how disabled actors and theater practitioners have encountered and embodied these disabled bodies in their depictions.

It's sort of a dual work, and every chapter deals with a specific play text, and is paired with a specific performance. And so it's half me talking about the play text and about various theoretical issues that it sends up, and then half is practitioners being interviewed about their work. And that perspective. And, and it's very much born out of this question of what is it about Beckett's work that has attracted so much disability performance, and the idea that this is work that is really, really engaged all the way through with impaired bodies and alternative impairments and environments in a way that hasn't really actually been recognized in the critical field as much as a lot of disabled practitioners have recognized these, they're really lived experiences of disabilities and this figures. And so a lot of the book, the sort of speaking to an academic audience and saying we need to follow what these practitioners are seeing, there's something here that we have overlooked by reading these bodies metaphorically, etc. We have quite a lot to learn from the practitioners here.

Hui: The first time that I know about your work is the article that you published I think years ago, in *Theater Topics*, talks about an audience member who has Tourette's Syndrome and how they perceive the show. And in that article, you introduce a concept, relaxed performance, which you also mentioned in your new book, chapter four, when you talk about audience access. So I'm just wondering,

in your definition, what is relaxed performance and why is it so important in the industry right now?

Hannah: Yes, so I very much follow Jess Thom, the director, primary performer of Touretteshero. She's a performer with Tourette's syndrome that manifests in both verbal and mobility tics. And she's worked in relaxed performance for a long time. Almost all of their company productions are relaxed performances. She defines relaxed performance as performances that take a relaxed attitude to behavior in the auditorium. It is nothing to do with the idea that the art on stage is more relaxed, or more half-hearted or less aesthetically engaged, etc. It's the recognition that as a range of spectators in the audience, we have different attentional behaviors. Some people will make more noise and people will need to move around more, etc.

And this is obviously particularly useful when you're thinking about access. If you have people who very literally cannot control what their bodies are doing in accord with a certain, you know, quite old fashioned silent, still audience, etc. But it is also interesting in that that is true of a lot of people who don't have an official diagnosis of any disability. We have different attentional behaviors. And you know, a mobile spectator or a slightly rustling spectator, etc. can be a very, very engaged and interested spectator. That's what relaxed performance tries to recognize and allow for.

Leigh: At People's Light, we have one relaxed performance for every production, and what we typically do is we raise the house lights so people can move around safely. We have a chill space. We announce at the beginning of the performance that this is a relaxed performance in which we relax the typical rules of theater etiquette. And that means allowing or inviting people to be who they are. It means we say explicitly this is a "no-shush zone." So people can vocalize as they need to. They can communicate with devices as they need to. And what I have found is the invitation is clearly extended to everyone. We often have other people whom I

believe to be neurotypical, who take advantage of the invitation as well, and who move in and out of the theater as they need to. I mean, to be a little explicit about it, we have a lot of middle-aged men who get up and take advantage of the freedom to go to the bathroom. And yes, they're welcome to do that. It's wonderful. So our invitation is much more than who you think we're inviting.

Hui: As a researcher who is now writing a dissertation on relaxed performance and experience-making of a neurodivergent audience member, I always remember that my friends commented on my project saying, Hui, you're doing something about relaxed performance, you must feel so relaxed during the whole research process. Quite the opposite. I feel sometimes overwhelmed, I feel lost, I feel torn while watching a relaxed performance. And I think Hannah, you mentioned in your article, actually we have a lot of different definitions of relaxed performance. And I personally consider relax here as a verb, means loosen the rules and norms, implicit or explicit rules and norms of spectatorship in theater in order to accommodate differences in the means of an audience member. So I think that the rules and norms are more in the house rather than on the stage, because I came from a background of audience study and I'm personally more interested in how audience members perceive the show. But of course, later, we can discuss how the access should be also built into the very beginning of the making of the art.

But I think a lot of people know about the term "relaxed performance" as an audience member, because you would know when you buy the ticket and there is like a pop-up window saying that you purchased a relaxed performance. So I think that is the way that I know about relaxed performance as an audience member. But as a term being officially introduced to theater industry, I think it is 2012 and 2013, UK has incorporated this relaxed performance pilot project and so that there are in total eight theater companies in West End, and they're trying to investigate the value of incorporating relaxed performance in their regular schedule.

Andrew: It's just so important. And as the sort of nonperformance interloper here, I would love for us to discuss a little bit about neurodiverse, neurotypical, which are common terms, but maybe they deserve a little unpacking here. And then also, maybe even a brief moment on general expectations, when quietness came to be, and how relaxed performance really seems to interact with them, maybe having its own evolution or chain.

Hannah: Yes, absolutely. Because this is one of my current bugbears. My students are fed up hearing about it. Neurodiversity as a term simply refers to the fact that all of our brains, all of our neurological systems operate in slightly different ways. We're all neurodiverse, everybody sitting in this meeting right now is neurodiverse, and yet there's no such thing as a neurodiverse individual, for example. That doesn't make sense. But within that concept of neurodiversity, we have the concepts of being neurotypical and being neurodivergent, and neurotypical being the idea that our brain system, our sensory system, our neurological system, functions as we broadly expect it to do. So in a medical sense, in a cultural and social sense, we sort of fit the expected norm. We behave as people expect us to do, and our sensory system operates as we expect it to do. Neurodivergent people diverge from that expected norm.

So we are getting into that tricky question which comes with defining disability as to how far we think about these things as medical, and things that diverge from what we think of as standards of health or useful necessary functioning, and how far we're talking about simply diverging from a constructed social or cultural expectation of this is how your body should work, this is how your brain should work.

Hui: And I also would add that neurodiversity, this term, was actually used first by the autistic community, first in the nineties. So it's born out of an autistic community, and I understand it as a political point of view: that the neurodiverse

community, the way that they perceive the world hold the same way as neurotypical persons.

Leigh: I will say in our theater when we talk about neurodiversity, we often talk about different forms of, or different broad categories of, neurodiversity. So we often talk about people with dementia. We'll talk about people with PTSD. We'll talk about other ways in which the brain might function differently from the expected ways. So, our invitation for a relaxed performance is to people with dementia, is to people with PTSD, and other other ways in which the brain just may not conform to what we think it ought to be doing.

Andrew: I'm also very curious–hopefully this isn't too elementary–what might be some of the typical expectations of an audience that relaxed performance is meant to diverge from itself? And, you know, where are those expectations? Does it have a history? Do they seem rather uniform through most performance spaces, or are there particular places where you'll see them or not?

Hannah: Yes, absolutely. This idea that we have a sort of modern and contemporary idea of what a good audience looks like: that silent, still, respectful audience. We interpret that sort of silence, stillness as respect, I think. It's an incredibly modern concept. I think a lot of people have a sort of vague historical sense of, say, for example, you know, Shakespeare's audiences at the Globe, the idea of the sort of raucous callback and, you know, vocal engagement with the performance. There is, as with most things in academia, there is discussion and debate as to exactly when we might pinpoint the beginning of this modern concept of theater etiquette.

At one point that there is a lot of historical evidence for, though, was the 1950s in the UK, at least where we are in the middle of a sort of social and political upheaval following World War II. There's a lot of shifting of class behavior, class categories. And one thing that we see is a lot of the theater industry starting to really police and instruct audiences in how to behave. You see theaters publishing

guides on how to behave. The Royal Festival Hall publishes, actually, a “man’s guide” to coughing, to warn you not to cough during performances. One theater company sent celebrity actors into schools to teach children how to behave. Don’t eat sweets, don’t rustle, don’t move about. Make sure your parents don’t talk to each other.

We do have this moment in the 1950s where we can see this work being really explicitly taught. This new idea. And I think now we’re much more accustomed to that being a self-policing idea. It’s become ingrained in us at a cultural level that that is what is good. We sort of treat it as an ahistorical, acultural idea, or at least a lot of mainstream white theater is doing. And I think most people who have experienced being policed and being shushed, etc., I would guess it’s more often from other audience members than from the theater necessarily. It’s become a sort of self-replicating system. We all police and discipline each other rather than meeting theaters to do it necessarily, which I imagine makes the work quite hard in terms of trying to overturn those ideas.

Leigh: Hannah, how does the presence of cell phones complicate that issue?

Hannah: I think cell phones is one of the trickiest questions because again, and I think there’s such a generational gap there as well, isn’t there? And I absolutely recognize that idea of, you know, the light goes on, someone, You know, A.) the fact that the light of the phone might genuinely be distracting you. But simply the idea that you can see someone not paying attention. And the very legitimate concerns that we’ve seen about recording, or you know, taking photographs of the actors on stage, particularly if they’re sort of intimate scenes, etc.. And I think there’s far less recognition in the general public of the fact that you may need your phone. It may be a technological access device, it may be, you know, something legitimately work related if you are an emergency health care worker, etc.. But I think that’s one of the hardest things. I mean, quite honestly, myself as

well, I see a teenager with a phone and my inclination is to go: Stop that! And have to think very carefully.. Hang on. You don't know. Let them be. They're fine.

Leigh: We recently had an issue at a theater performance on Broadway where one of the actors stopped the performance to scold a patron who was actually using her phone for accessibility and was very, very upset by the public shaming of it. And I think that's you know, an example of somebody who, one, the actor was not prepared for what was possibly, what was clearly a legitimate use of the phone.

But also it was not.. it was a blurry situation. It wasn't clear how this person was using the phone. It had not been explained. And it was painful all around. So it's worth the conversation.

Hui: Yeah. Going back to Andrew, your question about the expectation of audience member, I personally think that relaxed performance actively responds to this ableist etiquette, to being a quiet and still audience member which is a social construct of theater history, and I think even today, if you go to see a show, I just saw a show yesterday, it was 3 hours and 30 minutes without intermission. I wish that was a relaxed performance so I could at least go out and take a break and come back. But it was not. So you can still see this, the quiet and the still receptivity continues to dictate, like, when, where and how one should pay attention during the show. But relaxed performance really actively responds to the rule, to the norms, by, as what Leigh said,

turning the house lights on, allowing audience members to vocalize, encourage audience members to move around doing the show.

Leigh: I'm thinking about black American theater audiences and how there is an element of participation and call and response that is not necessarily expected... but it is welcomed. And I think that that is sort of an interesting exception to the

rules and expectations and is probably more aligned with the idea of the relaxed performance from the perspective of the audience members.

Hannah: That's certainly something in the UK, Kwame Kwei-Armah, whenever he took over artistic directorship of the Young Vic in London and talked a lot about the very necessary and very difficult job he had of diversifying that West End theater audience and said that he didn't necessarily realize when he first arrived, but that's such a crucial part of that job was actually, the sort of microcosm of of audience etiquette, the idea that, again, an engaged audience member who is enjoying, and who is listening may there be vocally engaged, maybe, you know, call and response, maybe clapping. That is not a sign of disrespect. That is a very, very clear sign of engagement.

I think one of the flip sides we've had or having at the minute in the UK, about this debate is the question of class. I've started to see responses whenever people bring up this idea of, you know, silence and stillness as a very middle class or upper middle class etiquette. And a lot of resistance from working class individuals, they're saying, you know, there is something incredibly patronizing about this. Just because I'm working class doesn't mean I don't know how to be quiet at the theater. I know what a theater is, I'm manager of the cinema, etc.. I think it's becoming one of the slightly more divisive bits of discourse where people are trying to, you know, out of good reason, trying to point out where we get these cultural constructions from.

And you run into these problems of sort of amassing ideas around, around a class, around a culture, etc.. It's one of the tricky bits of the discussion in the UK, at least at the moment.

Leigh: I think in the end what it boils down to is a certain kind of normalizing of behavior. What are we considering to be normal audience behavior? I have a very, very wise and wonderful colleague who was talking about inviting people into the audience who vocalized and she had a performance where I think there was one

person who was vocalizing and she said, what we really need to do is to invite more people so that this feels normal and expected. And I thought that was such a great idea, you know, to understand that this is not exceptional behavior, but it is but it is something that is very welcome and is more universal than we all think it might be.

Andrew: I think this leads us to a question that I know that Hui has, which is, how do these performances get described and communicated to people? Are they disability specific? Are they welcome to all? What are the challenges that come with choosing one over the other in order to make it a space that's very inclusive, but then also isn't just limited to a particular type of normal and then abnormal behavior that sort of maintains a sort of classic split?

Hui: Yeah, I think that is the struggle that I have right now when I'm trying to write about relaxed performance, because based on my observations of the theater company who feature relaxed performers in the past two decades, they are trying to make their language very inclusive, saying that this is something welcome to all. But at the end of the day, they need to describe their so-called target audience member. They would have to say, oh, this is for autistic community or anyone who has a sensory processing difference. So, they do have to specify at the end, even though you're trying to be inclusive. So I think that is the question that I have right now. I think I don't have an answer right now.

I want to hear Leigh, your thoughts on this because you are a practitioner in the field. So how do you deal with this?

Leigh: We just had a really interesting experience. We have for some years now offered relaxed performances for productions that we consider to be more adult in content and sophisticated ideas, all this kind of thing. The audience is typically older. And we had been offering our relaxed performances on Sunday matinees. We decided that we would experiment with offering the relaxed performance on a Friday evening. We just did this and the audience was very small. And I think that

two things were happening. One, I think the evening performance was not as accessible to our intended audience. And then my huge question, which I don't have an answer to yet, is whether the audience that typically went to a Friday evening performance said, Oh, this is not for us, and I don't know the answer to that. You know, we're asking the question. We're shifting things around to see what might happen. But I think that this–sort of to answer your question–this is something that we're still trying to figure out. It's a process.

And we had defined the relaxed performance as something that was open to everyone. But we also used a lot of language that identified . . . invited members as people who are neurodiverse.

And so I'm just wondering if the previous audience interpreted that as something that was less welcoming to them.

Hannah: Or perhaps even as well, I think sometimes there is that fear of taking up a resource as well. There is that sense of, oh, there is a need here that perhaps I shouldn't take that up if I don't if I don't desperately need it. And I quite like, Jess Tom has a slightly flippant but I think with a little bit of authenticity at the heart of it, idea that we should be moving to all performances as relaxed performances, as standard, and with some exceptions that are labeled "uptight performances." If you want an uptight performance, which I do, I quite like in an ideal world. I imagine part of the problem as well, though, is this idea of, if the ideal is universal access, universal design that allows everybody to be included, etc. We know on a practical level that doesn't work. People have competing access needs. If you have a hearing impairment, you might really struggle with a relaxed performance, For example. If you really need that, that stillness, that silence as well. So I do think this question of well, obviously there's sort of a, you don't want to risk that siloing is, as you're pointing out, Andrew, of going like, here is the performance for everybody, and then here is performance for other people. It's a really tricky balance there, thinking about competing access needs and the fact that I think

we'll never have a universal access design in any school of the world, let alone theater.

Leigh: Our relaxed performances often include ASL interpretation, audio description, and can include open captioning or the smart caption glasses, depending on the timing of the relaxed performance. I do think that that can create a sense of, I don't want to say competing needs, but I do want to say crowded needs, if that makes any sense.

You know, for one example, there are many people who are neurodiverse who need accessible seating. The ASL audience will need seating that often is accessible because it has to be very close to the interpreter. So we can't accommodate everyone. And this too, is a question about how to parse the different support systems so that we are accommodating everybody in the best way.

Hui: Yeah, I think for me, my observation is, in the US in the past two decades because, all starts from autism-friendly performance, that is initiated by Theatre Development Fund, TDF, they're doing this autism-friendly show on Broadway for autistic community, and 20 years later I interviewed them and asked them, have you ever think about changed your name to relaxed performance? And then they said no, because they know who their audience members are, they know who their community is, and they want to serve the community. So they don't want to change it to a more inclusive language. And that is something that surprised me. But on the other hand, I see a lot of theater company use relaxed performance, sensory–friendly performers and autism-friendly performance interchangeably, and that I think, make things more complicated. For me, I see scholars analyze relaxed performances through the lens of community theater if they know who their community are, who their community is, or through the lens of drama therapy. That is, too, a big school of thought. And there's a third kind of thinking is more, like what I'm personally more inclined to is, maybe this is an opportunity for

everybody, both neurotypical and neurodivergent, to discuss what kind of interpersonal relationship that we want in theater because, yes, we can loosen the rules and norms, but at the end of the day, you do need some rules and norms to share the time and space to watch the show together. And I think that is the invitation to everybody. We all need to discuss that.

Leigh: One thing that this conversation has not has not yet addressed is how the artists themselves are implicated in this. And the idea of drama therapy to me says, you want to shape the performance in a particular way. I could be wrong about that. But that's what it sounds like to me. And I think that the way that we conceived the relaxed performances at our theater is that we do not change the performance, not a whole lot. We used to maybe adjust the sound, maybe eliminate some sounds, but we don't do that as much anymore. We rely very, very heavily on our pre-performance guide to let people know what's coming and so that they can make some choices. But I do think, you know, I do think that there's a question about what we want from the audience, but also what we want from the performers.

And I will say that I have a number of our RP [relaxed performance] patrons who say we don't want the performance to change. We don't, because they view that as being very condescending, really, in a lot of ways.

Hannah: I think it's fascinating because it's getting at one of the reasons that I think your theater company is so exciting, it's this idea that you can make all the access requirements and needs, etc., that you want. You can have all the language about diversity and inclusion, if all your programming of relaxed performance are children's shows, and musicals, which is often the case in the West End and in London, that's not inclusive. That's your own quiet curatorial work going on there about who is coming to see relaxed performance or what people with access needs want to see, and that is still really, really pernicious in The West End certainly, so I think that's one of the sort of quiet exclusions that's

going on as well. But it's sometimes harder to pinpoint that work like your theater is doing so valuably.

Leigh: And the trick, though, is to find that audience for the adult RPs. And that's really the hard work. And we're trying to figure out how to reach people who want this. And this is why I sort of joke about the middle aged men, because I am finding that the relaxed performances for the adult productions are relaxed for so many more people than you would think. We also think about relaxed performances for parents of very young children. But I think that the adult performances, the adult productions are very, very tricky. One of the constant topics in the cohort that I lead is, how do we find this audience?

My experience, I don't know if this is universal or fair, but my experience with neurodivergent adults is that many do not belong to groups necessarily, and are and are often coming to theaters as individuals. So there is no kind of centralized space to invite people. So it's building this audience one participant at a time. And that takes time. But I think that we can get there. Also, what I'm not acknowledging is how many people may already be in the audience. And I don't know.

Hannah: Yeah, I mean, I think and this is very much me speaking from an idealistic academic perspective, not having to worry about my box office takings, etc..

But I do think one thing that is really interesting there, is this question of relaxed performance or simply relaxed cultural expectations around theater auditoria being a really useful thing for audiences in general. And I'm wary of sort of going down that line whereby we only do disability access if it's good for other people too, right? We weren't allowed to stim until fidget spinners were a thing and then everyone is allowed to stim.

But I do think it gets to the heart of why you turn to theater as a medium. You go there to be live and embodied with other people, but that's the defining point of the medium. And with both audience members and actors on stage, it's about being together, bodily. Otherwise, you know why go? Why not put on a film? Why not watch live television, etc.? So it seems really counterintuitive then, to have erected this cultural expectation that you also mustn't let it be known that you have a body, right? You've got to be as invisible as possible, and that if any other spectator, heaven forbid, makes you aware of their presence, that that needs to be shushed and disciplined. Then we have to go and gather together as a community and then pretend that we can't see each other. I think we are getting into the question of, well, why come to the theater then? Which is taking us away from the question of access. But I do think it's an intriguing possibility that relaxed performance opens up as well. A license to rethink the fact that the point of the theater medium itself.

Andrew: So one thing that I've been hearing in the conversation so far is that there's still this question of whether or not a relaxed performance could be a default performance or is it still an amended, or adjusted, or somehow different than what would otherwise be a default? So I'm wondering, what are some things that a relaxed performance challenges about the other conventions of performance that maybe would enhance, or change, or make better than other performance, and making it no longer something that's, you know, seen as other or inferior, but in fact could maybe, you know, push performance in new and important directions.

Hannah: I'm interested in this question in how it relates to this previous discussion we had of the kind of quiet, curious thing that goes on of what shows are suitable for relaxed performance. And one of the chapters of my book on *Beckett and Disability Performance* looks very specifically at Jess Tom's Touretteshero production of Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, which is canonically one of the most difficult shows for an actor to perform. It's incredibly intense, incredibly

demanding. It's also a really difficult show to watch. You know, it is designed and, you know, we have a lot of biographical material from Beckett himself, working to create this show that quote unquote, works on the nerves of the audience, not the understanding. And it's a really interesting case study, I think, because that is something where relaxed performance as a term can bring up issues, right? We're not always relaxed when we watch a performance, nor do we always go to the theater to be relaxed.

Obviously there are wonderful, entertaining shows where you can go and zone completely and have a wonderful time, but sometimes we go to be challenged or to see something incredibly intense, whether that's emotionally intense or, you know, dialogue intense, and Jess Tom spoke very specifically about how they choose *Not I* as a performance in part because she saw a lot of similarities between the protagonist's experience of life and her experience of Tourette's syndrome, but also because it laid down the gauntlet of what relaxed performance could be, if that was sort of the the end goal of a thing that could not be done as a relaxed performance and still work the way it was intended. If they could do that, then nobody could say to them, oh, well, this show wouldn't work as a relaxed performance. They could say, well, we've done Beckett. We've done Beckett's *Not I*. And it is one of the things that I go into in quite a lot of detail in that chapter. I think it is really fascinating because how do you craft a relaxed performance that allows you to be relaxed in the ways that are necessary under the criteria for what relaxed performance is, but also still recreates that tension and that real emotional intensity that is part of the play. Complicated, interestingly, I think, by the fact that the Samuel Beckett estate who licenses Beckett plays are very, very strict about them being done according to the author's intention. So they're quite happy, you know, they allowed a lot of adaptations for Jess Tom's *Not I*, but only those that fit with what the play was meant to produce. So they were also under that, the necessity of not going, Oh, we're going to do a "Not I" that everyone really enjoys, that's really chill and easy to listen to.

So we think it's a wonderful case study of how far you can push these ideas of relaxed performance and still have that aesthetic and verbal and emotional intensity as well.

Andrew: Incredible imagination, because it really shows you where things could go and maybe even just the beginning, because there's so much more to continue exploring. On the flip side, I'm really curious about what are some of the resistances to relaxed performance. You know, we get these splashy headlines sometimes that talk about some sort of disruption in the audience, and suddenly that becomes a big news item for some people because of the social controversy that it arises. But I'm also thinking, not just in practice or research, but just all of the avenues where relaxed performance is starting to be discussed and considered. And when there is this resistance, how is it best navigated? Like what are ways to diffuse the situation and to keep pushing forward in relaxed performance, which seems not just necessary as an ethical question, but it really seems to be a creative avenue that's going to really keep pushing performance, keeping it updated and finding new creative direction.

Leigh: I don't know if it's resistance as much as it is unfamiliarity. I don't work with the creative part of the theaters, with the artistic leadership in creating the productions. But I do think that now there is curiosity about what it means to include thinking about relaxed performances in the creation of art and very basic questions, like what is this piece? How do we make selections? How do we choose plays? How do we choose actors? How do we do this in a welcoming way, in a relaxed way, really? So I think that this is something that is starting to be considered again.

I, personally, because I have to prepare the actors for the relaxed performance, I see no resistance to it. They are so excited to see a broader audience before them, and responding in new ways. What I see is, really it's just unfamiliarity, but

there is universal enthusiasm to welcoming these new audience members. I mean, why not?

Hannah: That's such a lovely thing to hear, Leigh. That was really, really encouraging. I love that.

I have to agree with you. I think, you know, I'm slightly anecdotal here, but I think that a lot of people who, again, you know, sort of see relaxed performance and decide not to book it, it's not necessarily a decision of "I will like that because.." it's just a knee jerk reaction to, that's not what I usually go and see, and maybe I'm not 100% certain of what it is and if it's meant for me. I think in general it's very easy to win people around to relaxed performance when you explain what it is. I think a lot of people go, Oh, oh, I love that. You know, I love the idea of being able to get up or stretch or yawn or whatever. Just, again, acknowledge that you have a body, which again is just taking us back to this really difficult question of, how do you familiarize people with the idea, or are you sort of preaching to the choir whenever you talk about relaxed performance?

I think in a way and Hui, I'd be interested to know what you think about this, but I think within academia in particular, and this is perhaps more the case in the UK than the US, but there is still something of a resistance to audience studies as a field in its own right. I think certainly a lot of the audience studies experts that I know working within the UK often have to fight quite hard for it to be recognized as a field within its own right. The idea that, Oh, but you know, it's theater studies, right? You deal with the text, you deal with forms. And my friend Kirsty Sedgman is wonderful in sort of going: That's what the audience is. That's a really crucial part of theater studies. And we span all of our non academics. I'm talking about it, right? We're talking about good audience behavior and bad audience behavior and so on.

So, I think that's something within academia and within the UK. I'd be interested to know what you think from your perspective, Hui, that we are lagging behind a lot

on recognizing audience studies in its own right.

Hui: I can't agree more, and that is exactly my struggle right now. I have to fight. I have to advocate myself saying that yes, I'm more interested in what happened in the house than on the stage, which is totally unimaginable for a lot of my cohort and colleagues in the US. Yes, audience studies is a field in theater and performance, under the big umbrella term of theater and performance study.

Andrew: It sounds to me like we are at this really wonderful culminating point in the conversation. It's been so rich and vibrant, starting with some clear concepts on relaxed performance, this history of this social standard of quiet performance that really just doesn't seem to be suiting the future of performance, talking about neurodiversity in all its forms. But then learning such wonderful things about each person's individual context. So I want to invite everyone to give some final thoughts: where things are going, maybe talk about your own projects or research a little bit, or if there's some large concept that either you took from the conversation or you haven't had a chance to say yet that you really want to make sure people get to hear about, before we close things out for the day.

Leigh: One thing that I have to say is that we have to keep talking to the audiences that we are appealing to, and I think including them in the conversations about the accommodations, about the way the audience looks like, what the audience looks like, what we're doing for them, what's working for them has been so enlightening. And I think it's just so important.

Hannah: I think that the point I would most like to make, and it is very much born out of what Leigh is saying as well in terms of the work that your theater is doing, but it is the attention to how relaxed performance and embedded access is not simply a virtue signaling charity exercise. I think there is a lot of space to think about how it leads to aesthetic innovation and aesthetic excellence. You know, really astonishing work. My book looks really specifically at professional disability productions, which is not to say that there isn't wonderful amateur and

community and drama therapy work right there, but I think we run the risk of siloing this, this sort of artistic work off as something that isn't really art or again, isn't really for me, I don't need that access.

Of course I wouldn't go to see that. And I think I'm really excited to see what creative access and embedded access does to specific play texts, to specific performances, and yes, how it can be oriented toward how we think about the theater medium as a whole as well.

Hui: Yeah, for me I really like the pre-performance guide that is created by a theater company called Trinity Rep based in Rhode Island in the States. So they have a page that, talking to neurotypical audience members, just explaining what are fidget toys, what is repetitive speech, what are tics. So I feel like it's really an open conversation for both neurotypical and neurodivergent audience members to discuss, negotiate, and rehearse the ideal–if it is not too utopian, this term here–the ideal interpersonal relationship in theater, because as I said, even though we relax, we loosen the rules and norms to reflect, what do we mean by a normal or normative ways to behave in theater? We still need some rules and norms. Yeah, but we can talk about that. So I really appreciate relaxed performance gives us this discursive site and also prefigurative model to talk about interpersonal relationships in theater.

Andrew: On behalf of the Cultural Studies Association and Positions podcast, enormous thank you to our guests today and also a special shout out to the production team, including Mark, Elaine, and many others, and look forward to more podcasts coming soon.

Thank you so much.

Credits

Produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter.

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[Editors' note: This work has undergone post-publication peer review through a published scholarly commentary and public comments.]

Notes

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